

30 Seconds

Grabbing Sarah's hand and beckoning her toward him, Alex flung off his croc shoes and dashed across the cool, autumn grass still green and dotted with patches of orange, late-season flowers. The soft blades of grass licking between his toes as he went.

God, she is beautiful, he thought as her long lashes batted and her round cheeks rose up to him. She wore a half-smile as she was nervously biting her lip.

"C'mon Susan, stop worrying about what was on television this morning. Let's enjoy our picnic. Those news reports you and your father saw on the morning shows happen all the time.

He slowed in the midst of the large, isolated field located atop a high hill. San Diego was a stretch of shadowed shapes in the distance with the sun centered on the horizon above as it heading toward its evening rest.

Seeing the sun's location, he got their picnic ready, first pulling out a large white and red checkered blanket. Thankful for only a light breeze, the blanket laid still on the grass.

Her green eyes looked at him under crinkled blonde brows. "Alex, the news warned the little dictator might actually attack. Father says he's crazy enough to send something easily concealed and driven into a populated area undetected."

Alex was determined to make this an outing to remember. The ring box pinched into his thigh as he knelt and opened a basket. From it he filled the covering with a variety of meats, cheeses, sourdough from Fernando's Bakery, and her favorite wine, a sweet Moscato from the Bay Area. Oh yes, he'd nearly left the ripe strawberries she loved in the basket.

"Sweetheart, that's all news hype. What are the chances something like that would really happen?"

"It has me very upset," she fidgeted, putting one hand softly to her chest. Her pale skin contrasted her royal blue sun dress.

Alex rose and stood close to her, looking down slightly. He tenderly grabbed her hand, then ran the fingers from his free hand through his straight, black hair. His handsome face pleaded with her to relax. He leaned forward and kissed her softly on her full lips. Her scent always intoxicated him.

As he released their kiss he could hear her exhale softly, and saw her tension let go. Her shoulders relaxed and her fingers softened to his touch.

"I'm sorry. I know I'm being silly and you are right."

He laughed lightly, "Glad to see you're coming around. I'm hoping you'll get into the habit of saying that."

She huffed and acted indignant, moving her hand from her chest to his and giving a light shove. “Alex Bryson, I shall not be so easily tamed.”

“I brought your favorite wine”, he said with a boyish grin.

She glanced down to the nicely laid out meal, then turned her eyes toward him again, one eyebrow lifted high, like she always did when being impish. “I see that. And”, she paused, “you are wearing a new, collared shirt, which I might say, you look very handsome in.”

“Just trying to impress my girl.”

She smiled wide, showing white teeth and a deep dimple in her left cheek. “It’s working.”

“And it’s only taken me four years.” He snickered as he softly touched his forehead to hers. The ring box in his pocket was struggling to get out. He resisted the urge until after the meal was done and they were enjoying the wine, just as the sun set on the city beyond. The timing had to be perfect.

He looked to the meal atop the blanket and stretched an arm in invitation. “Are you ready to ...” but his words were cut short by a bright flash that radiated from the distant skyline of San Diego. Their time became very short.

30 seconds

Both faces jerked toward the growing, burning dome of white light. It was as if there were two suns; one above the city and one within. Nerve endings in their jaws went lax as they gapped in horror. The skyline, between the horrific white light and the hill where they sat, now more resembled an x-ray of the horizon. There was no sound yet, but the very ground protested under their feet.

“Lord, No!” Alex cried out. “No, no, no!” He quickly reached down and felt his left pocket where the ring-box lay. A vacuum formed in his chest, the air there frozen, unable to enter or escape.

Sarah clenched his hand and with the other grasped her cross pendant. “Alex...Alex what do we do?”

“Turn away baby, don’t look at it!”, he moved his hand from his pocket to her chin, turning it as he pulled her close, and they both looked in the opposite direction in an ever-tightening embrace as the inevitable reached burning tentacles toward them.

The cool breeze was still gently blowing in their faces as just six miles away civilization was burning to cinders. He pulled her tight to his chest and wrapped his arms around her, her own hands clasped his white, silk shirt and the dainty, golden cross necklace that was the last gift from her mother before she succumbed to illness three years ago.

Sarah squeaked out, “My Daddy is back there...”

He leaned down toward her ear and nuzzled her tenderly, “I’m here with you. Sweetheart, I love you more than life. I had so many plans for us”. He could feel her warm tears running from her cheek onto his, then dripping down to wet his shirt. The scent of Victoria Secret perfume she liked so much wafted into his senses.

20 Seconds

The billowing mushroom of cloud and light beyond their silhouettes grew in size and rose, reaching into the sky and blotting out the sun itself. An expanding dark, gray wall was quickly expanding across the ground, filled with the debris of all things. They never saw it.

Her eyes swam in salty pools as her mind whirled through her future dreams. Thoughts spun through hoped-for years of life with Alex in a matter of a few seconds; her white wedding dress, furnishing their first apartment, holding their first child and, watching her widowed father bask the new grandchild in love just like he had done for her. Her chest heaved and shuddered as she sobbed, “Damn Alex, it’s no fair, it’s not fair! What did we ever do to anyone?”

She looked up at him and saw how much he looked of both of his parents; a muscular, Midwestern construction worker who moved to California in the 80’s; and a slender, Latino girl that he had met on the beach shortly after. It was his mother that gave him the great tan and dark hair, but it was his father’s intense gray eyes that stood out now, wide with concern and fear. Funny, she thought to herself, the things to come to mind when faced with tragedy.

In return, he looked down at her small frame. It sickened him that he was defenseless to protect her from this. His mind, too, flashed images; her in her red and white cheerleading outfit in high school, the first kiss she gave him in his old Pontiac, how she cried for weeks after losing her mother, clinging to him for support.

Sarah released his shirt and softly placed her hand on the side of his face, her eyes showing as much concern for him as herself.

Alex realized he was angry. He was on the precipice of vowing his life to her after all his schooling, and working, much of that time spent away from her. All that time was lost. Time, he thought, time is running out quickly. Make the best of it Alex.

He reached quickly into his pocket and pulled the ring case out. He opened it and took out the ring and threw the box aside. He slowed, then lovingly placed the ring on her finger, slid it into position, and took both her hands and lifted them to his lips, kissing each.

In this most treacherous moment of their history, she smiled.

His lips trembled, “Just keep looking at me sweetheart, and... I’ll look at you, my wife. You’ll be the last thing I see this side of Heaven. His eyes too began to wet.

10 Seconds

She wrapped her arms around his waist and replied, “Alex, husband, I do love you so, with all my heart! I always will!”

She seemed so frail to him suddenly, small and shapely, yet now seeming as a lamb before a ravenous pack of wolves. He stroked her long locks with both hands, “And I love you, now and forever”.

5 Seconds

The ground shuddered and heaved as if the entire forest in the distance fell at once. Both gasped and pulled each other even tighter as it became hard to stand on the quivering earth. A quick glance from Alex assured her they had nowhere to run; no place to hide out in this open space.

4 Seconds

Cracking sounds came from the earth as if the spirits of hell were screaming with vengeance. A ringing pitch began to shatter the air around them causing their inner ears to hurt, as if diving too deep in the nearby ocean. Through it all, their gazes never left each other even though their features were paling from ever-brightening light.

3 Seconds

The wall of fire, dust, and fury came into view of the couple. If they had looked, they would have seen the trees, grass, and the very ground itself, pulled and swirled into the billowing cloud that covered the earth.

The heat came. The horrible, unforgiving hot breath of man’s hate began to baste them in the inferno of a thousand suns. Their nerves hadn’t the time to register the pain. The end was upon them.

2 Seconds

Despite these torments, he pulled her into a passionate kiss, determined he would pass from this world in the only true heaven he had known in his 23 years,... being with her. She gave herself completely into his soft lips. With acceptance of their certain fate, they enjoyed each other’s passion in their final kiss.

1 Second

They never saw it. The shockwave screamed toward them with an endless wall of debris moving nearly the speed of sound and the world about them went completely white. They never noticed. They never knew. They never felt. Together, as one, they vanished as did all things that day.

500 Years Beyond

A dove flew over the young forest, its wings spread wide as it glided on the warm currents coming in from the massive saltwater bay on the horizon. A hundred small islands rose from the bay, some glinting brightly in the sunset.

The bird, unusual as it was completely white, frequented the small maple tree that stood alone in the midst of a small round field in the center of the lush wood, short though it was. The dove was returning here to enjoy the wealth of wild strawberries at the center of the circular opening.

It flew and landed on one of two crystalline shapes at the center of the strawberry patch. They looked nearly like stalagmites except they were clear and fused together about halfway down and to the ground. At the height where the two overlapped, a gold band was frozen in place.

Was this thing man-made? A memorial like the huge structure built at the edge of the bay? Or something more spiritual? Most prefer to think it divinity.

The bird spread its wings as the warm breeze blew, the falling sun reflecting off the bay that now filled the valley. The gold within the crystal glinted as a reminder that earthly things may perish, but endless love remains.